

# Coming into the Life

## *Entrance into Gay Sexuality for Black Women*

### COMING INTO THE LIFE VERSUS COMING OUT

Psychologists and psychotherapists have portrayed coming out of the closet, or acknowledging one's same-sex attractions, acting upon them, disclosing them to others, and accepting them as part of a sexual identity, as a developmental process that most homosexuals share.<sup>1</sup> Variations on a core model describe six stages of this process. First, individuals have a subjective sense of feeling "different" from others of their same gender. Subsequently, they identify these feelings as homosexual, disclose the feelings to others, come to accept the feelings as part of an identity, and search for a community of like persons. They complete the transition when they become involved in a relationship with someone of the same sex.<sup>2</sup> "Coming out" is understood as a process that ends in its subject's acceptance of a "modern" gay identity, in which the subject has merged her private self-understandings with the public self she reveals to others.

Several scholars of lesbian and bisexual identity have criticized this model for its failure to consider alternative, often nonlinear paths by which many gay women construct a sexual identity.<sup>3</sup> Drawing on my fieldwork with Black lesbians in New York City, I have found that the linear five-stage model of coming out does not fully capture the complex ways in which individuals construct a personal and sexual identity based not just on sexual orientation and gender but on race and class as well. The development of women's sexual orientation follows diverse pathways shaped by multiple social and cultural influences.

To begin with, the concept of “coming out” does not accurately capture the experience of acting on same-sex attraction by entering and participating in Black gay social life. Instead, this experience, broadly understood, is best conceptualized as “coming into” a life and community with particular norms and expectations for its members. The phrase “coming into the life” not only better describes the experience of same-sex desire for Black people who learn how to “be” gay in Black social settings, it also captures the essence of how they learn to label that desire and reveal it to others. The concept of “coming into the life” more completely represents the experiences of my respondents, then, because it describes coming into an understanding of a particular subculture—of learning about and adjusting to the patterns of interaction expected in lesbian communities and in Black lesbian social environments specifically. “Coming into the life” also encompasses coming into a greater acknowledgment and acceptance of one’s gay sexuality and beginning the process of negotiating and managing this identity status as it relates to race and to other established identities. The set of processes, range of possibilities, and spectrum of choices Black lesbians encounter as they come to recognize and become comfortable acting on their same-sex desire in Black communities and various Black American and West Indian social contexts are described in this chapter.

There are different ways of coming into the life (or not). To understand these processes, I drew from a variety of sources of data. During the in-depth interviews I asked my respondents questions about how they defined their sexuality (i.e., their relationship experiences with women and with men), and I asked them to tell me the story of how they came into “the life” (the exact wording of these questions can be found in Appendix C). I conducted a focus group on respondents’ experiences in the gay social worlds of New York that raised questions about the contexts in which they came to understand their same-sex desires. The survey also contained questions that I used to identify patterns in the ways women came to take on a gay sexuality. I asked the extent to which respondents agreed or disagreed with the following two statements: “Being gay is something that is completely beyond one’s control” and “Being gay is a conscious choice I have made.” Responses ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*, and no opinion. There were other survey questions that were analyzed to identify differences in women’s pathways into a gay sexuality, including questions that asked the respondent to describe her sexuality now, at age 15, and at age 21. Possible choices were “Exclusively lesbian,” “Predominantly lesbian, only slightly heterosexual,”

“Predominantly lesbian, but significantly heterosexual,” “Equally lesbian and heterosexual,” “Predominantly heterosexual, but significantly lesbian,” “Predominantly heterosexual, only slightly lesbian,” and “Exclusively heterosexual.” I asked whether there was a term other than “lesbian” that better described their sexuality, what was the longest amount of time they have spent in committed relationships with men and with women, and what have been their experiences with heterosexual marriage.

Ultimately, all the women I studied came to recognize and act on their attraction to women. One group named it, acted on it, or both in their adolescent years, while a second group felt this attraction but conformed to societal gender norms in their early years, turning to a gay sexuality in adulthood. For a third group, same-sex desire did not emerge until adulthood, after which they confirmed a lesbian rather than a bisexuality. For a fourth group, there is a persistent and ongoing fluidity in their desire for women and men. I organize the analysis that follows around these four groups, each of whose members came into the life in a distinct way. In the process, I distinguish carefully between having a first experience of same-sex desire, acting on that desire, and claiming an identity based in a sexuality. In later chapters I suggest that the pathways women take in coming to terms with and openly practicing a gay sexuality have important associations with the types of women they partner with, the processes by which they enter motherhood, and the types of families they create.

As scholars of Black sexuality have shown, American- and Caribbean-born Black women often must negotiate a complex set of demands for gender “respectability” and racial uplift.<sup>4</sup> Black lesbians, in order to live openly gay lives, must negotiate this terrain while simultaneously engaging in an active expression of sexual agency. Women who have followed different pathways into a gay sexuality share various tropes common to coming out stories, such as an unnamed attraction to members of the same sex, feelings of difference, and fear of retribution from family and community members when coming to terms with same-sex desire, and these tropes are discussed in this chapter. The chapter also shows how different race and economic contexts influence the ways individuals come to understand a gay sexuality and portray it to others.

## STRAIGHT-UP GAY WOMEN

Carlie Lewis, a hairstylist born in 1962, explained how she defines her sexuality: “I’m a lesbian without, you know, having a reason behind it.

It's just, there's no reason. I've always liked women. Didn't realize what my attraction was when I was younger, 'cause I had boyfriends, but to me they were never really boyfriends, they were just like boys that were my friends—you know what I'm saying? It was like I never really treated them like boyfriends, and I was more attracted to women, so to me I've always been a lesbian. . . . Once I realized there were women, ahh, forget about the men!"

Charlie belongs to a category that I have labeled "straight-up gay." There were twenty straight-up gay women in my interview group of fifty-eight women, making up 34 percent of the sample. Those who followed this first pathway into a gay sexuality either self-identified as gay at an early age or deemphasized any sexuality until adulthood. All but two of them have a history of nonfeminine gender presentation and an interest in stereotypically male activities. The members of this group tend to link their same-sex desire and feelings of difference regarding masculinity and femininity to their self-understandings of gay sexuality. For them, gay sexuality is not merely behavior they engage in: rather, it is an identity category, something they experience as part of an essentialized sense of self.

### *Feelings of Difference: Gender Presentation and Growing Up as a Tomboy*

In my survey, I asked, "If you had to select only one, which of these definitions would describe your sexuality?" There were seven responses available, ranging from 1 (exclusively lesbian)" to 7(exclusively heterosexual). All but one of the women in the straight-up gay category defined herself as exclusively lesbian.<sup>5</sup> When asked during the in-depth interviews how they would define their sexuality, the respondents said things like "I am strictly homosexual," "Straight-up gay," and "I'm a lesbian without having a reason behind it." In the interviews, 90 percent (18 of the straight-up gay group) reported having romantic same-sex attractions before the age of eighteen, and on the survey, 90 percent said they considered themselves predominantly or exclusively lesbian by age twenty-one.<sup>6</sup>

Most respondents in this group found it difficult to pinpoint the particular moment when they first felt same-sex attraction. They said things like "I've always known I was different," "I've always known I was a lesbian," "I was born gay, it has been in me forever," and "Everyone already knew—[I] didn't have to make no grand announcement." Before

they took on a gay identity or even knew what it meant to have same-sex desire, these women felt different from other girls. Earlier research has found a similar category of lesbian women; Ponse's 1978 study of lesbian identity and community, for example, identified as "primary lesbians" those who reported feeling a sense of difference from other girls and women at early ages.

It was Corey James, a union organizer born in 1966 and raised by her grandmother in a Bronx housing project, who used the words "straight-up gay" to describe her sexuality to me. She said: "There's no ifs, ands or buts about it. And I've know it since I was about—since seven." When I asked her what it was in her experiences with women and men that prompted her to reply in this way, she answered: "I've just always known. I didn't experience, have any [sexual] experience with men until I was almost eighteen. And that was only because I didn't have any references to acknowledge how I was feeling. I didn't have—I was the only gay person around me. I was the only gay person that I knew of in my family. I mean, I had uncles who were kind of feminine, but they never were openly gay. So I kinda kept how I felt in the background. And then I got to college and said, 'To heck with it.'"

In addition to feeling different but not specifically being able to name that difference, straight-up gay women reported that when they were younger they behaved in ways that did not conform to gendered expectations. All but two identified as tomboys in childhood and adolescence. Trina Adams, a hotel associate born in 1969 and raised in a lower-middle-class neighborhood in Queens, referred back to her childhood interest in boys' activities and her inability to perform simple tasks and play games associated with African American girls' leisure as evidence of her sexual orientation: "I was always a tomboy. I never could jump double-dutch, I can't braid hair. I never liked skirts—even when I was in first grade, I would cry if I had to wear a skirt. I always liked to play boy things like 'kick the can.' I remember climbing trees, wrestling, and I could play basketball, but I could *really* play, not like girls. I was good like the boys. They'd pick teams, I would be the first one they picked." For Trina, her athleticism and the way it was expressed—through her desire to compete with boys and play on boys' teams—was evidence not just of divergent interests from girls but of a future gay self.

Like Trina, straight-up gay women tend to label certain childhood behaviors as male-identified and to link those activities to the same-sex attraction they felt as children, teenagers, or young adults. They reported preferring a clothing style that was "very casual" and never too

feminine, and almost all had a similar story about how they hated wearing dresses in their youth or had an embarrassing and awkward experience when they were forced to wear a dress. Social historian Robin D. G. Kelley argues that our sense of gender is made and developed in childhood, and “the limits, boundaries, and contestations in the world of play constitute key moments in the creation and shaping of gender identity” (1997, 205). Sports like football or jump rope are forms of play that are central to the construction of masculinity and femininity, and children as well as authority figures often erect strict gender boundaries to control access and keep boys and girls separate in their forms of play.

In their historical account of lesbian identity formation, Kennedy and Davis (1993) found that many women who adopted masculine gender presentations as adults had experienced an early appropriation of masculine behavior, and for them this gender nonconformity was an indicator of difference at an early age. It was difficult for the women in Kennedy and Davis’ study to separate their interest in women from the masculinity they enacted. Rather, they saw sexuality as firmly embedded in gender, so that masculine behavior was closely entwined with same-sex attraction. Bullough (2008) cautions against assuming that gender nonconformity in childhood *always* leads to homosexuality in adulthood. It does not. However, several studies have found that lesbians are more likely than are heterosexual women to report being a tomboy or preferring boys’ games and toys to those of girls in childhood.<sup>7</sup>

When describing how they came to think of themselves as gay, twelve of the twenty women I interviewed (60 percent) specifically mentioned that as a young child they wished they were a boy, wished they could have the freedoms of a boy, or wanted to engage in the types of activities that boys participated in. There was a sense that they did not want to be male physically, but were aware that they did not look or act in ways that were consistent with how girls were supposed to act, and did not share the interests that girls were supposed to have. They viewed their childhood desire to participate in experiences reserved for boys as an essential part of their realization of a gay identity as adults.

Zoe Ferron, for example, a telephone linesman born in 1960 to lower-middle-class Black American parents, said of her gender identity, “I would have made a better boy than a girl.” When I asked her why, she replied:

I never felt like a girl. Never really understood what it felt like to feel like a girl in terms of roles on television. I think roles for me were always skewed, especially what we saw environmentally, what we saw visually. There weren’t even Black people on TV when I was growing up. The White people were

Barbie, and I am not Barbie. I didn't even feel like a Barbie, and I didn't even feel—I would probably say that I never viewed myself really as a girl. . . . Um, there was a time when I thought I would consider gender reassignment. I actually thought about that. I saw a therapist, even met some transgender people and decided that I would rather be a healthy woman than an unhealthy man . . . and also I think my religious upbringing had something to do with that. I figured at some point 'God would fix it,' whatever that means. I never had any kind of sexual attraction to men. I think much more like a man. I appreciate women. I don't know how men appreciate women—sometimes I don't think they do appreciate them—but I appreciate women.

At an early age, Zoe had a keen awareness of how she differed from the ideal gender type and of how her race as well as her physical mannerisms played a role in her inability to ever achieve the ideal type. She was also aware that her interests deviated from those expected of girls and were more similar to those given to boys. She felt a mismatch that stayed with her throughout childhood and even into adulthood, and she contemplated gender reassignment as a strategy to align her with the sex that matched her interests and desires. While others have written about the inarticulate gender conflicts of masculine-identified lesbians who, from a young age had feelings of perplexity about their gender differences (i.e., Hiestand and Levitt 2005), racial difference was importantly implicated in the mismatch described by Zoe. Race as well as gender expression made it difficult for her to see how her experience as a Black girl related to the image of Barbie as the ideal expression of female gender.

The pressures of gender conformity were equally strong for Nilda Flores, though she responded to them in a different way. Nilda's account of her adolescent understanding of gender and how it related to her sexuality suggests the importance of gender complementarity, which made it possible for her to envision herself in a same-sex romantic encounter. Born in South America in 1963 to parents who were both physicians, she and her family left a repressive dictatorship and immigrated to the United States in 1974. While growing up, she says she was "very out of touch" with herself and "living in denial" about her sexuality. As a result, from the time she was a teenager in the late 1970s until her mid-to-late twenties, she operationalized her desires for women in daydreams in which she retreated into a male body. Experiencing her desires as a boy and as a fantasy allowed her to avoid having to see herself as gay or think concretely about sexuality at all:

I think what I did is kind of live in a fantasy world, and this is going to sound crazy, but I created this persona who was a boy—but I realize now

that that was really me! And so I would live in this fantasy world, whenever I had a free minute that's what I would do, think about that, but I never really lived as a lesbian in those years, and I never even thought of my own [sexuality]. . . . I had a *mad* crush on this guy . . . who was a drag queen, I guess you would say, and I just loved him when he dressed up, and we would go out to dinner and I would open the doors for him, so I don't know how I didn't know this about myself, but at the time I didn't know it. I know it sounds crazy, but I didn't. I always had fantasies about women from very young, kissing, but I was always in this persona that I invented and I never, like, saw *myself*. I had these mad crushes on girls.

When Nilda was asked: "When you sort of created this persona, were there other women around you who were lesbians? Did you know what that was?" she replied: "I don't think I ever—I mean, now when I look back, I think about some people in high school, and I am like, 'Yeah, they were lesbians.' But at the time I was just not aware. I was in my own world." Here, we see an interest in occupying a male body as a way to appropriately enact a desire to be with women. For Nilda, gender complementarity was necessary to romantic interaction, and since she was interested in women, she had to think of herself as a male in order to engage that fantasy. Research suggests that extreme patterns of gender nonconforming behavior in youth, combined with a strong desire to be a boy, are associated with a greater likelihood of having a homosexual orientation in adulthood (Zucker 2004). However, rather than reflecting ingrained masculine dispositions, these feelings may reflect respondents' *cultural beliefs* about sexual orientation. That is to say, women who believe in an essentialist lesbian identity may interpret tomboy behaviors in childhood as a sign of masculinity. Gottschalk (2003) makes this point, and it is emphasized in the work of Peplau and Huppin (2008).

### *Experiences with Men and Transitions into Lesbian Sexuality*

The responses of straight-up gay women clearly reveal a lack of visible models of lesbian sexuality for young women of color coming of age in the 1960s and 1970s. The majority in this group say they were not aware of the possibility of a lesbian sexuality, what that might actually mean for their lives, or how to process feelings of same-sex attraction. For many, the lack of models delayed their open acknowledgement and acceptance of their same-sex desires until adulthood.

Straight-up gay women say they like men and enjoy their company but see women rather than men as objects of desire. Many report close



friendships with men, but any romantic relationships they had with men were short, shallow, and primarily nonsexual. Shaunte Austin's account was typical for this group: she had a close male friend who she called her "fake boyfriend" and who eventually became like a brother to her. Their relationship was never sexual, and she says she only brought him home "to make an appearance" because her mother threatened to disown her if she ever found out Shaunte was gay. Other women in the group said they tried to date boys in their teenage years because that was what was expected of them and because they had not identified their lack of interest in boys and feelings for girls as specifically lesbian.

Twelve (60 percent) of the straight-up gay respondents reported acting on their romantic interest in girls before age eighteen and seeing those experiences as evidence of same-sex desire. They described hand-holding, "going with" or "going steady" with a girl, and having someone in their lives they considered a romantic girlfriend. These relationships tended not to be explicitly sexual, though they did involve intimate kissing and fondling, and the women distinguished them from the more adult female sexual activity they experienced as grown women. Ruthie Erickson, born in 1966, says the same-sex attraction she felt in her earlier teen years was different from the sexual relationships she had later on, and when she finally did have her first sexual experience, "The desire was not new, but actually going out in public was new." She felt she was "taking it to the next level." So it was the open expression of her same-sex desires that made her finally define herself as gay.

### *Class Differences in the Expression of Gay Sexuality for Straight-Up Gay Women*

For all of the women in this group, feelings of shame and stigma accompanied their early recognition of same-sex desire. Social class seems, however, to have influenced whether the women expressed that desire in adolescence or in adulthood. Those women who completed college and entered high-status occupations tended not to have relationships with other women until adulthood, while those who entered working-class occupations often began romantic relationships in adolescence. The former group delayed acting on their lesbian desires because they wanted to acquire additional schooling and build their careers first, and saw the open expression of same-sex desire as inconsistent with those goals. This was the case not only for women who were raised middle class but also for women who were raised working class or poor but

achieved middle- and upper-middle-class status in adulthood. While 60 percent of straight-up gay women had romantic female involvements in adolescence, the other 40 percent, all of whom now hold high-status occupations, reported having had no serious romantic or sexual experiences with women until adulthood. They also did not have any serious romantic involvements with boys during that time. While many of their heterosexual peers had their first sexual experiences with boys at age fifteen or sixteen, straight-up gay women felt unusual because they were not having sex with anyone.

High-status women had difficulty acknowledging a gay sexuality in their younger years because being gay carried such a stigma, and they had a strong interest in portraying a Black middle-class respectability to the outside world. Lynn Witherspoon's experience suggests a desire to be seen as "respectable" in three different areas of her life. Lynn is a corporate attorney born in a small town in Pennsylvania in 1971. Her father was a physician and her college-educated mother did not work outside the home. When asked how she defines her sexuality, she responded, "I usually say that I am gay." When I asked what it is about her experiences with women or men that makes her say she is gay, she told me she used to date men in high school and in college but has never had intercourse with a man and was never "super emotionally attracted to guys." The first way she tries to embody a sense of respectability that is linked to class and race is in her discussion of why she could not acknowledge her attraction to women as a teenager. In her community, strangers would recognize her as "Dr. Witherspoon's daughter" because there were so few Blacks and because she looks like her father. This made her sensitive to how she behaved in public.

Lynn says her friends in high school were "pretty conservative" and very White: out of 600 students, she and her brother were the only African Americans. When she realized she was interested in women she did not know any gay people in her town. She remembers that "Everybody sort of had to fit a mold there," and the people she knew only ever discussed gay issues in a negative context. So school was a second area where conformity was expected. She did not want to bring down the reputation of her family by questioning or experimenting with her feelings, and went away to college and law school in California where she was finally able to live a gay life.

A third arena where Lynn continues to feel pressure to remain consistent with norms of respectability is in the workplace. But at her law firm, she is more concerned about how race, rather than sexuality, influ-

ences the ways her colleagues and supervisors evaluate her performance. One of the firm's partners is openly lesbian, which has made Lynn feel more comfortable bringing her mate Diana to business social functions. But Lynn is one of very few Black associates, and although she has established herself at work, she continues to worry that her peers will think she's "just an affirmative action baby" or "affirmative action candidate" for promotions. The way she carries herself, even the way she talks about and interacts with her mate at Christmas parties and firm sporting events, all reflect her continuous efforts to portray a particular Black, middle-class respectability.

Angie Russell, a police sergeant born in 1967, is an only child. Her family was one of the first to racially integrate Starrett City, a series of apartment complexes designed for the middle class that became a Brooklyn neighborhood in 1974. Angie was also one of the first Blacks to attend the predominantly White elementary school nearby. Race and racial group membership were a salient part of her identity. In looking back on her teenage years, Angie says she did not have or was not aware of any feelings of attraction to girls before adulthood. She refused to believe she was gay and became angry when as a teenager a relative suggested she might be gay. For her, being gay was equated with something negative and with behavior that fell outside of a strong racial identity. The two were not compatible. She came into her gay sexuality while in college "down South," where she was a member of the Division I women's basketball team at her school in North Carolina. Angie did not want her teammates to know she was interested in women, and traveled great distances from campus to go to African American lesbian clubs and parties. She did not feel comfortable speaking freely about her same-sex desire even to other Blacks whom she thought shared those feelings. She also kept her gay sexuality from Black heterosexuals in order to remain connected to the Black community on campus.

Upwardly mobile straight-up gays believed they had something concrete to lose in taking on an openly gay identity as they entered adulthood. These women were on a path from working-class or lower-middle-class status to joining the ranks of the middle class, and they had an added interest in conforming to expectations of heterosexuality as they entered this new world. The type of upward mobility they were striving for required conformity in all areas of their lives (i.e., in whom they partnered with as well as their clothing, dress, hairstyle, and language). Coming to terms with their sexuality would have required accepting that they were failing to meet society's expectations: they saw the enactment

of a gay identity as inserting an unnecessary obstacle into what was an already difficult path because of race.<sup>8</sup> The majority of the straight-up gays in this study were also coming to terms with their sexuality during a time of forced racial integration of schools and neighborhoods throughout New York, and the visibility of race as an identity category influenced how they thought about and prioritized other identities based on other statuses.

Women in the straight-up gay cohort who were not college educated pursued same-sex desires in their teen years by having girlfriends and dating girls in high school and in late adolescence, though not openly. The working-class women in this category were not prevented from pursuing romantic attractions by the stigma surrounding homosexuality, but it did affect the way they viewed themselves, when and how they revealed a lesbian sexuality, and how they interacted with others whom they knew were also pursuing same-sex desire. From 1983 through 1987, for example, Trina Adams attended Andrew Jackson High School, a working-class, predominantly Black public school in Queens. She says that lots of girls at her school and many of her basketball teammates dated girls, but no one was openly gay or spoke about it among themselves or with other students: “I think for a lot of women who grew up in New York City back then in the early 1980s it was ‘cliquey,’ it was like a secret life. When I was in the ninth grade a lot of the students were gay. It was so funny—I don’t know what we said to each other to let each other out of the closet, but we’d go in locker rooms, we would watch each other while we kissed. My team played August Martin [another public high school in Queens], and everyone was lesbians on that team every year. . . . So, when we would play high school games, going home on the bus with August Martin girls, we would match up. It was like a secret society.” When I asked Trina, “So, did you hang out with a lot of gay girls in the classes in high school, or was it pretty much confined to the team?” she replied: “No, it’s funny, because we would never really hang out because also it was also like a stigma. They looked at girls on the basketball team like ‘They’re butches, they’re dykes.’ They didn’t know a name for it—that is what they would call us. So really we would not hang around each other because no one really liked that stigma. All my friends in high school were straight, so when I wasn’t on the court, I really, really tried to hang with them [straight friends] because I didn’t like the stigma of that word ‘lesbian.’ So they figured, ‘Oh, Trina is not like them because she hangs with straight people,’ but I really was like them.”

Even though Trina admitted to having been a tomboy in adolescence, she was very uncomfortable with having her gay identity exposed to her Black heterosexual peers. She acknowledged the intense same-sex relationships that were taking place on her sports team, noting that her teammates took great care not to spend time together outside of the team for fear that they would be labeled “lesbians” and be perceived by their classmates in a negative way. The stigma attached to a lesbian sexuality in high school was significant and severe. Women who “looked gay” or who did not conform to traditional notions of femininity in adolescence were in danger of being singled out and ridiculed, so those who acted on their same-sex attractions did so in very secretive ways and outside of the purview of their straight friends. They also made great efforts to prevent being labeled as part of a group of “lesbians,” which carried a very derogatory meaning.

For both classes of straight-up gay women, nonconforming gender presentation and social activities during childhood are mirrored in the types of jobs they pursue in adulthood: they tend to work in male-dominated blue-collar industries or high-status white-collar occupations that are disproportionately occupied by men. Their occupations include police sergeant, security guard, construction worker, corrections officer, licensed electrician, retired military officer, financial consultant, telephone company lineman, union organizer, attorney, and psychiatrist.

### *Geographic Distance from Family to Come into the Life*

Regardless of class, as teenagers and young adults, straight-up gay women used the substantial freedom of movement children raised in cities often have, to explore their sexuality. Children in large urban areas travel by public transportation without adult supervision, and many are involved in sports, dance, or other activities that require time out of the house and away from parents. This lower level of supervision may facilitate an early exploration of their sexuality. But despite these freedoms, many straight-up gay women still had to physically distance themselves from their families by moving out of their neighborhoods in order to fully come into a gay sexuality. They needed distance to pursue identities and emotional and sexual fulfillment that were inconsistent with the desires of their families.<sup>9</sup> They remained in predominantly Black social settings, however. The straight-up gay women in this study learned what it meant to be gay in Black social environments—house parties, clubs, and bars that had a Black and Latina clientele.

Ruthie Erickson, for example, used to travel from her home in Brooklyn to Lower Manhattan to sneak into lesbian clubs as a teenager, and she had her first girlfriend at the age of seventeen. Her girlfriend spent lots of time at Ruthie's home, but Ruthie emphatically says she was not openly gay at that time and wanted her family to think of the girl as her platonic friend only. "[As a teenager] I definitely wasn't out to my family, the people that I grew up with and my friends—none of them really knew. So it was like living two totally different lives, you know? My take on that was if I wanted to be who I wanted to be, then I had to leave, and that's when I moved." Ruthie elaborated: "I moved to Manhattan, because at home it's like you're living two lives, and I wasn't really ready to tackle the whole thing of telling my parents and all that, so I just kinda separated it."

Corey James says that even though she's known since she was seven that she is gay, she never had any references to acknowledge or explain her feelings. It was not until she left home for college in upstate New York that she began to figure it all out. Although Corey lived away from home in the dormitory, her entrance into a lesbian life took place on the weekends, when she would return to the city to go to lesbian nightclubs and parties. She did not come out as a lesbian on her college campus until her senior year. This suggests that it was not the campus environment that facilitated her coming out process but the freedom and lack of family surveillance that being away from home gave her. The geographical and mental distance from her family allowed her to comfortably explore her sexuality and begin to live an openly gay life.

Regardless of whether their transition into a lesbian sexuality was smooth or rocky, the first experiences straight-up gay women in this study had in specifically gay environments were at bars and dance parties that were predominantly Black or that had significant numbers of African Americans. Even college-educated lesbians had their first experiences with the gay life and came into an understanding of lesbian culture through the bar and party scenes, which were mixed by social class. Marissa Dillard, born in 1964, attended a predominantly White women's college in New York and had her first lesbian relationship with a Black student whom she met her first year on campus. She learned about the life of lesbians, however, through private parties and clubs in Manhattan that catered to Black lesbian populations. Angie Russell, as we have seen, was on her college basketball team with other women she knew were having lesbian relationships, yet she would still drive forty minutes away from campus to go to Black lesbian parties in

a different city. As subsequent chapters will show, these experiences of coming into the life in racially segregated settings would have important consequences for how straight-up gay women expressed their lesbian identities as adults.

### *Essentialist Understandings of Sexuality and Race*

Straight-up gay women say that now that they have come to accept or embrace their gay sexual identity as a salient part of their being, this identity feels natural and normal, and they find the pursuit of same-sex relationships to be a satisfying experience. They report that their identity as gay women is an expression of their “true selves.” Ninety percent of the straight-up gay women I surveyed agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “Being gay is something that is completely beyond one’s control,” though the majority (63 percent) also agreed or strongly agreed that “One can be gay and never act on those feelings.” This suggests that straight-up gay women construe their gay sexuality as pervasive and unchangeable, and they experience it as an identity based on what Katz referred to as an “essence,” an inherent quality “which may be manifested, reflected, indicated or represented by, but [do] not exist in, conduct” (1975, 1371). It also suggests agency or choice in the decision to express feelings of same-sex attraction.

Essential identities are experienced as more than just an embodiment of attributes: they are a state of being rather than a consequence of any behavior. Straight-up gay women see their sexuality as part of an essentialized self, and they often create a strong visual presentation of this identity that strengthens the permanence of their commitment to it. Sociologist Wayne Brekhus (2003) labels women and men in this category as “gay lifestylers” because they have an “authentic” gay presentation, are highly visible as gay, and are perceived to organize their lives around the gay aspect of their identities. Like the “primary lesbians” Arlene Stein identifies in her 1997 work, straight-up gay women experience the process of coming to identify as gay as one of coming to terms with an authentic self.

All but two of the straight-up gay women I interviewed have a very visible nonfeminine gender presentation that is crafted not merely to reveal an authentic self to others but also to enact an authentic inner self that is at odds with dominant cultural expectations. The majority believe that an individual can be gay and never act on those feelings because at one time they followed that path. Eventually, however, circumstances

allowed them to make their gay identities visible, and as a result, outsiders interpret their gay sexuality as a dominant identity category. That is, they are immediately categorized by others as gay. In their minds, however, some other status may be the more dominant, or they may integrate any combination of marked statuses into a hyphenated identity. Straight-up gay women also interpreted their racial identities in an essentialist way and had strong commitments to their racial/ethnic groups.

When straight-up gay women form families, their patterns of mate selection are strongly based on gender presentation: they actively seek out gender complementarity in a partner. They seek partners who look feminine, and they also tend to enter motherhood through routes other than heterosexual intercourse, such as adoption or partnering with a woman who already has children. I analyze the links between coming into the life and the expression of gender presentation more fully in the next chapter.

## THE CONFORMISTS

Anita Adams, a receptionist born in 1970, described her path into the life to me in this way: “I’ve always had feelings from young for women. I’ve always had that *want*—to be with them, . . . to walk down the street together—I’ve always wanted to do that. It was in the back of my mind. But due to the fact of how things are supposed to look to family and friends, I never did that until my twenties when I started venturing off mentally. I still took my time, ’cause I guess I wanted to have children first. But I finally decided to take that next step in life.”

Women like Anita who took what I call a “conformist” path to actualizing their lesbian sexuality experienced same-sex desire at an early age but had a major sexual relationship with a man before coming to terms with their gay sexuality. Despite having participated in heterosexual love relationships, conformists are similar to straight-up gay women in that they tend to be essentialist in their understanding of their gay sexuality, seeing that desire as something they have always had but were unable to fully experience due to various outside pressures to conform. They also experience sexual orientation as a state of being rather than a behavior in which they engage. For this reason, their decision to pursue same-sex desire was also a decision to permanently enact a gay identity, and they consider that identity the manifestation of their true inner selves. Now that they have transitioned into a gay identity, conformists present their stories as narratives of finding a



path to self-acceptance. They often express their gay identity through regular participation and membership in gay-oriented Black activities, the raising of children within lesbian-headed families, and the establishment of social networks of Black gay friends.

Eighteen of the fifty-eight women I interviewed (31 percent) are part of the conformist group. Their gender presentation is a mixture of feminine and gender-blending, with only one person having a self-identified masculine gender style. This is in stark contrast to straight-up gay respondents, who almost all have a gender presentation that is nonfeminine. The majority of West Indian women in this study also fell into the conformist category.

### *Conformists Coming into the Life*

Like straight-up gay women, conformists also said they had crushes on girls at early ages, and expressed those feelings physically by touching and kissing in elementary or junior high school. They did not label these attractions as “gay” at the time, though they felt a stigma around those desires when they occurred during adolescence. Like straight-up gay women, conformists also see their lesbian sexuality as a significant identity trait. However, two factors most significantly distinguish conformists from those who are straight-up gay. First, they tend not to link their early attractions to women to a sense of feeling “different” from other girls in childhood, and they do not uniformly report having stereotypically male interests or being a tomboy while growing up. Second, conformists were more responsive to cues from the racial community and from the larger society discouraging the open and public expression of a gay sexuality. Conformists were much more affected by social, cultural, and religious messages such as “If you do this you are going to hell,” “Live your life decently and in order,” “Do not embarrass your grandmother back on the island,” “You already have three strikes against you, why make things any worse for yourself?” or “You’ve achieved what so few of us have been able to accomplish, why tarnish that with this kind of behavior in public?” Conformists felt a more acute pressure to conform than did straight-up gay women, and they responded by acquiescing to the demands of family, culture, and community. Instead of outwardly exploring their initial same-sex attractions, they suppressed their interest in women, avoided analyzing what these feelings of interest might mean, settled for close platonic or ambiguous friendships with women, or engaged in same-sex relationships in secret. Many of them shielded their same-sex

interest by making a public show of dating or having serious cohabiting relationships with men.

At the time of the survey, all of the conformists defined their sexuality as exclusively or predominantly lesbian. This represents a significant change from how they thought about their sexuality in earlier periods in their lives. Only half of them described themselves as exclusively or predominantly lesbian by age twenty-one. (Recall that 90 percent of straight-up lesbians described themselves in this way by age twenty-one.) This suggests the greater extent to which conformists masked or ignored their feelings of same-sex attraction as younger women. For those growing up outside of the United States, that pressure was cultural: in Caribbean countries, women were expected to have close relationships with one another, but publicly acting on same-sex attraction was strongly discouraged. As a result, a long period of time passed between when foreign-born women first felt same-sex desire and when they first considered themselves lesbians.

Toni Hernandez, a public school teacher born in 1969, was raised with her grandmother and three sisters in a small country in the Spanish-speaking Caribbean. She has been attracted to girls since the age of five, but that attraction was strictly forbidden in her culture, and she was extremely afraid to express or act upon those feelings. This trepidation made her reluctant to show even platonic love for her friends: she says she was frightened to hug her friends for fear that “it” would come out and her attractions would be exposed. Toni immigrated to the United States at the age of seventeen to join her mother, who had arrived years earlier. Soon after her arrival, she entered a cohabiting heterosexual relationship and bore two children. It was not until the age of twenty-five, after firmly settling into her life in the United States, that she began to openly explore the feelings she had always had toward women. She did that by going to the New York City Gay and Lesbian Community Center and meeting other women in a group called African Ancestral Lesbians United for Societal Change.<sup>10</sup>

Rochelle Fitzwilliam, a business executive born in 1973, spent the first eighteen years of her life in the countryside of Trinidad. She describes the place where she grew up as a “very small village, rural by any standards” and “communal,” where everyone knew each other’s names and families and everyone knew one another’s business and reported each other’s “news,” be it good or bad. Rochelle first acted on her attraction to women at age eight but it was not until the age of

twenty-two, however, that she thought of herself as lesbian. She says that in Trinidad, “there was a part of [her] life [she] didn’t express,” and she thought that by moving to New York she would be able to more fully explore “that side” of herself. When I asked for clarification, she said: “I am really talking about my relationships with women, because coming from a small Caribbean country, there is a lot of homophobia. It’s a sort of culture where there are gay people and everybody knows that they are gay, but no one ever mentions it, and no one ever says the word ‘gay.’ But at that point in time [right after she finished college in 1994 at age twenty-one], I had not identified that was the problem, that that was the conflict I had, but I knew that there was some point of confusion or turmoil in my life and I felt that going into a different environment might help me to address that problem.”

Rochelle remembers that in the late 1980s and early 1990s in Trinidad, if a woman had an interest in women, it was not directly spoken about. Rochelle found that the process of finding a same-sex partner in Trinidad was less like romantically dating women and “more like developing a friendship that eventually leads to something . . . I don’t think up front you have an agenda, where here [in the United States or in New York] I think you can have an agenda up front because people are much more open, and we sort of know what they are talking about. Over there, it’s like you have a best friend and . . . you’ll do a lot of things together, you know, go to the movies or just spend more time together than two best friends would normally spend, and then I guess from there you can develop an intimate relationship. So that has been sort of my experience. It wasn’t going to a club or gay group or anything.”

Rochelle’s experience in Trinidad followed a pattern common in societies where same-sex desire is openly disparaged or legally sanctioned: individuals who want to act on that desire often do so under socially ambiguous conditions, keeping their intentions veiled and following a more obscure and longer path. This is the case for lesbians and gay men in many areas of the world, as emerging research on gay populations in rural and suburban parts of the country and in other regions has shown.<sup>11</sup> Others who grew up in the Caribbean describe a similar vagueness when referring to how they would enact same-sex attractions back home. Those experiences made them less likely to name their feelings as those of same-sex attraction and less likely to take on an identity as gay or lesbian.

There is a small literature on relocation to the United States as a strategy for foreign-born gay people to move their sexual desires from behavior enacted in the private realm to an identity status that encompasses part of a larger self-definition. While much of this work has been dominated by the experiences of men (see, for example, Cantú 2001), Acosta (2008) writes about Mexican lesbians distancing themselves from their families of origin through migration in order to create spaces for themselves where they feel freer to express a gay sexuality. This process is shaped by many factors, including the sexuality politics in one's country of origin, cultural expressions of sexuality and desire, as well as the reception of the receiving country toward one's racial and ethnic group. Upon arrival, the process is facilitated by the immigrant's connection with lesbian-oriented social groups and organizations. The experience of Black immigrant lesbians resonates with this work, particularly in reference to their eventual participation in Westernized understandings of identities organized around sexual desire. Black immigrant women in the United States must also contend with the lower social status of Black women as a group, and this also affects processes of incorporation into communities organized around race and sexuality.

*Transitions into a Lesbian Identity: Crisis in Coming to Terms with Same-Sex Desire*

In a private letter dated November 1975, the well-known Black feminist Barbara Smith wrote to noted activist Cheryl Clarke that when some women come out, they feel "scared, sick, abnormal, while others feel normal for the first time in their lives." Smith said that the latter had been her experience.<sup>12</sup> I found that for most of the straight-up gay women I spoke to, their feelings of taking on an openly gay identity resembled Smith's, while the majority of conformists report going through some type of crisis or fear during the process of deciding to be openly gay. Caroline Tate, born in 1966, says that at age nineteen or twenty, her daughter's father told her he thought she was gay. She had grown up in Florence, a small town in South Carolina with conservative southern values. The turmoil for Caroline surrounded whether and how to embrace a gay sexuality despite the negative associations she had with people in that category:

He said, "You're gay, you're a lesbian, you like women." And I was like, "What are you talking about? That's not true." But in my heart I knew it was. I can't tell you why he said it. I never asked him why he said it, but I

know it was almost cutting me with a knife when he did say it, because I was feeling that way inside. But like I said, I was afraid to be that person. I was afraid for a number of reasons. One of them was because we do care what people say about us. I grew up with people saying bad things about gay women, and I didn't want to be that person that I heard about all my life—"That's sad," "They have a problem," "It's nasty." Even though I was feeling like a gay woman, I just didn't want for people to think that I was. I didn't want to be called those names. But I always knew.

Caroline says that she remembers being hurt by what he said because "It was the truth." She explains, "I just hadn't acted on it yet, but I was feeling that way in my heart."

The most important factor leading to the participation of conformists in a gay sexuality was opportunity—opportunity that they purposefully sought out or that they happened upon. Asa Bambir is a Ghanaian woman born in 1971. She says she has always been attracted to girls from the time she was young, but she was also committed to leading a respectable life, one that her Ghanaian mother would approve of. Throughout high school and into college, she dated men, and her last relationship with a man occurred over a period of two years while in college. They became engaged, and it was at that crossroads in her life that she began to share with him her interest in "experimenting with women." Her desire to act on her attraction toward women grew, and he tried several strategies to keep their relationship moving forward, including arranging for couples therapy and bringing a third person, a woman, into their sexual relationship. Eventually, Asa cheated on him with another woman, after which she says "things just fell apart."

Soon after that, Asa says she and a gay male friend "stumbled upon a gay and lesbian parade," and when they passed a section of women in the parade, she found herself "in awe." It was here that she first began to concretely consider what it would be like to take on a gay identity. She described that experience in the following way: "There was this one particular woman that was part of the crowd, and I don't know what it was about her because, to be honest, to this day if I saw her I would not look twice at her, but there was something about her. Maybe it was her toughness or the fact that she had her hair dyed platinum blonde and it was cut in a boyish cut. I was completely drawn to her—I don't know if I was projecting something of me that I saw in her, a little bit of toughness or whatever. But I was like, 'Oh my god, she is so cool!' . . . So my coming out process was basically pursuing this woman, because after the parade I needed to know who she was." Asa began searching for the

woman at gay men's bars and parties with a White gay male friend. At first she avoided women-only venues because she still felt "squeamish" about lesbianism, but after a while, she began to drag her friend to the women's parties, and in the process she began to integrate herself into the public sphere of lesbian life.

### *Men and Heterosexual Marriage*

Unlike straight-up gay women, conformists more directly report having had past attractions and love relationships with men. Looking back on these heterosexual experiences, however, conformists interpret them as "default" relationships they entered because they could not understand their desire for women, they did not want others to know they were attracted to women, or they could not see how it would be possible to act on their feelings for women. Conformists say that any feelings of love they have had for men do not compare to the depth and intensity of love, closeness, and connectedness they are able to experience with women. The greater intensity of their feelings for women are evidence for this group of their true lesbian identity. They point to barriers in their social environments that prevented them from initially acting on their same-sex desire until much later in their lives. They also mention wanting to live up to the expectations of heterosexuality imposed on them by others.

Conformists tend to agree that being gay is something that is completely beyond one's control: 83 percent of them agreed or strongly agreed with this statement on the survey. They also feel strongly that one chooses whether to enact a gay sexuality: 80 percent agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "One can be gay at one period of time and then be heterosexual at another point in time." So they think their desires are innate within themselves (beyond their control), but they can decide when to act on those desires. This implies an essentialist understanding of their own sexualities, but it also suggests a freedom of action in how they live their lives.

Caroline, for example, said "I'm gay, I'm a lesbian. It's something I always knew. But I think some of us who have children or who have had experiences with men or who say that they don't dislike men . . . you're saying, 'I'm not against being with a man, I have been with a man, but now I'm with a woman.' Growing up, before I came into my sexuality, I knew I liked women. But because of the way I grew up and where I'm from, and it was always bad to be that way, I had to suppress those feelings. I suppressed those feelings, and I would always wonder

why I was attracted to women or wonder why I wanted to kiss my best friend instead of going to a party with her and hang out. But because of my environment, I pretended that it wasn't happening to me." Some women like Caroline look back on their time with men and say that the driving force behind the feelings they had for men was a craving for attention that men gave them. This is what she says about her relationship with the father of her daughter: "I was in love with the idea of being in love I guess, because he was this good-looking guy. And I was just so happy that he paid little me some attention. And I just looked at him and went, 'Wow, he is good looking and he wants to be with *me*?' So I think at that time, I think it was enough for me, and I fell in love with that. . . . When I was with him, I think I was looking for someone to pay attention to me, someone who didn't mind being with me in public, someone who didn't mind calling me their girlfriend. At that time, that was enough, because where I came from, I didn't have that. So there's this good-looking guy, this is love for me right now."

This feeling of craving love and being open to accepting it from a man who had traits that are socially valued—she mentions that he is good looking and is surprised someone with his qualities would pay attention to her—was enough to move her forward into the relationship. His attention, in the context of her belief that the feelings she had for women were wrong and a sign of being a bad person, made her feel that being with him was the best she could do. Caroline and other conformists said they entered relationships with men because they had not sufficiently dealt with their attraction to women or were confused about the feelings they had for women and did not know what to do about them. Given this uncertainty, they found it easier to go along with the attraction they had for men. Caroline came into the life as a self-identified "fag hag" by first spending time with her best friend, a Black gay man, and his friends, going out socially with them. She met her first female lover at a gay club party. They were together for two years, and after that experience, Caroline says, "I just never looked back. I just continued my journey."

Women born in the Caribbean repeatedly told me that if they were able to recognize their own feelings of same-sex desire, they did not see how they could ever act on them in any public way or how they themselves could see a gay relationship as a legitimate relationship. They had not been able to imagine even the possibility of forming something defined as "family" with another woman. The people they knew who acted on same-sex desire did so in secret, in relationships that were fleeting, because it was difficult to have a long-term relationship without having a

public gay identity. Sifa Brody, an entrepreneur born in 1964 and raised in Jamaica, West Indies, says she first acted on her same-sex attraction in 1976 at age twelve, but she did not consider herself a lesbian until age twenty. While she was attracted to girls at an early age, it was not until she grew older that she began to more fully understand and act on those feelings.

Before Sifa moved to the United States at the age of twenty-seven, she spent her young adulthood going out to private gay social events in secluded areas of the island that mainly drew gay men. She and a few other women would attend those parties, and occasionally she met women to date. She says Jamaican society during the 1980s had a “very low tolerance for gays, so it’s very very very harsh. *Very harsh.*” But the punitive nature of the culture did not stop individuals from having gay relations—it only made them more secretive in their sexual behavior. She says that in Jamaica “there is a whole community there that’s gay, and it’s so quiet and hidden that if you are not gay, you wouldn’t know. Only if you are in that community—then you will [know].” Sifa found that people did not normally confront women about having gay relationships as long as they maintained a façade of heterosexuality: “For the most part, they don’t confront you. They whisper, or they look at you, or they say stuff to make you feel bad. But they wouldn’t confront you, or they didn’t confront me. And a lot of the guys in my neighborhood, they knew. I didn’t tell them, but they knew.” While Sifa did not know of any women who had been physically assaulted as a result of their relations with other women, she knew of and had witnessed attacks on several male friends accused of being effeminate or believed to be gay, including one incident that involved a stranger drawing a gun on her friend outside of a gay men’s party.

While Sifa’s experiences did not stop her from spending time in gay social settings, they did make her cautious about enacting her same-sex desire publicly. She found her first lesbian relationship at age seventeen very frustrating. It began as a platonic friendship that involved phone calls every night (which was expensive, because she and her friend lived on different parts of the island) and visits every weekend. She and the woman had such a deep fear of admitting their attraction to one another and acting on it that it took four years of “constant hanging out, being in contact, and then developing feelings for her” before they did so. Cultural norms prevented her from fully acting on her own feelings and “being herself.” She remembers: “You couldn’t hold hands, you couldn’t hug. You couldn’t be yourself, because it’s not accepted. That’s what made it hard. And considering that it’s, as I said, against the law, you don’t want



to put your life in jeopardy for a relationship. You would if people were more tolerant, but people in Jamaica are extremely ignorant as far as gay relationships are concerned.” Even when they went to gay parties together, Sifa was reluctant to be open about the relationship. She says that gay life in Jamaica “is so quiet, so secret,” that she “didn’t want anybody to know that she was my girlfriend,” so she would tell everyone her girlfriend was just “a friend from out of town.” She says that having relationships with women in Jamaica was “really hard. Very, very hard.”

Another thing Sifa did to maintain the secrecy of her relationships with women was pursue public relationships with men. Her last boyfriend was a man whom she dated for more than five years and whom she intended to marry. Sifa eventually ended the relationship, but she said the break up had less to do with her interest in women and everything to do with his controlling and abusive ways. Had he been a better person, she says, she would have married him, because it would have spared her from having to think through and deal with her feelings for women. Her relationships with women would have continued to be enacted on the sideline of her life, as secondary, discrete dalliances.

Conformists do not label themselves “bisexual,” despite having had prior romantic feelings for men. They say their interests are in women, who are the source of their greatest emotional fulfillment. Daphne Competello, a Puerto Rican woman born in 1969, says that once she had a relationship with a woman, she never turned back: “I mean for me, [coming out] was very hard, because I was married before. I had a child. So for me to come out, it was *very* hard, and I did it instantly. My mother thought, ‘You just did this—how are you going to say you’re a lesbian?’ I was like, ‘No! I know I’m not going to go back to that, because I can’t.’ You know what I’m saying? I think that bisexual people are just greedy!” Other conformists said something similar, expressing how difficult the decision to embrace a gay sexuality was for them but how, once they had acted on their same-sex desire, they “never looked back.” Anita, who has had cohabiting relationships with the fathers of her two daughters, says she knows she will not have romantic feelings for men in the future: “I just don’t have it in me. It won’t come back. It’s not going to come back, because I already see what I can establish and what I can get and how I can grow with a woman.” The narrative they tell themselves is that they are moving from one group (men) to another group (women) or taking steps to enact the desires they have always had.

Despite having had prior romantic relationships with men, conformists do not see bisexuality as a viable alternative to heterosexuality. Because

they have experienced relationships with men as less fulfilling substitutes for relationships with women, they are reluctant to return to men, despite their greater interest (relative to straight-up gay women) in conforming to societal expectations. For conformists, being in long-term lesbian relationships and participating in a community with other Black gay people are primary ways they maintain a commitment to an openly gay sexuality.

### *Social Class and Conformity*

Women with working-class and middle-class family backgrounds were equally distributed among straight-up gay and conformist pathways. Indeed, they were equally distributed among all four pathways identified in this chapter. Among conformists, however, women who were raised in high-poverty households had to deal with so many levels of family disorganization and such great economic pressure that living as openly gay was not often at the forefront of their minds. It was viewed almost as a luxury to be able to focus so intently on their personal lives.<sup>13</sup> Social scientists Linda Burton and Belinda Tucker (2009) observed something similar in their research on low-income heterosexual women raising families: they found that the amount of time and energy that goes into sustaining a romantic or marital union can be burdensome and overwhelming when added to the multiple demands and stressors that exist in the often chaotic lives of these women, who may find it difficult to devote the emotional and psychological resources to such an endeavor.

Elizabeth Bennett, born in 1970 in Brooklyn, was attracted to girls in high school but did not see how she could ever have a relationship with a woman. Her abusive, drug-addicted father controlled her every move and those of everyone else in her household, which included her mother and five siblings. She feels that the conditions she has lived in and the experiences she has had coming into adulthood narrowed the possibilities for who she could strive to be in life, limiting not only the types of jobs she could hold and the amount of education she could attain but whom she could love. When Elizabeth's oldest sister attended college at a private university in New York, she earned good grades. However, continuous problems with financial aid were compounded by her father making her return her books to the bookstore to give him money he would use to support his long-term drug habit. When he found the check she had received for student financial aid, which she had tried to

hide under a floorboard in her room, and cashed it for his own use, Elizabeth's sister gave up on getting a college education.

Elizabeth says this event affected her decision making when she was accepted to Fordham University a few years later. When her father told her in no uncertain terms that she would not be allowed to live on campus, she worried that living at home would prevent her from doing well in school. She decided instead to forego the college route and continue full-time in the cooperative education job as an office aide that she had held since high school. At least that way, she figured, she would be able to live on her own and independently support herself. She stayed in that job for the next fifteen years, helping to support her youngest brother through college and taking occasional classes herself at a local community college.

When Elizabeth first began dating at age nineteen, it was with a man much older than she was, and she quickly left home to live with him. They married and had a child together in 1995 when she was twenty-five. Around the time of her child's birth she and her husband bought a computer, and through the "birth" of the Internet she began to meet women secretly in an online chat room. She answered a few women seeking women ads in the Village Voice newspaper and at age twenty-eight summoned the courage to leave her husband, more fully establish her own independence, and pursue life as a gay woman.

Growing up in a very poor and unstable household left its mark on Elizabeth. It took her until the age of twenty-seven before she felt confident enough to begin to pursue her personal desires. After she left her husband, she changed careers, moving from her secretarial job to work in the field of accounting and to pursue other interests. Elizabeth views her move toward embracing the gay sexuality she has always felt as part of the luxury that comes with charting one's own life course.

Conformists raised in middle- and upper-middle-class families, as well as upwardly mobile conformists raised in working-class families, by contrast, pursued relationships with men despite their same-sex desires in an effort to defend or create a self-presentation of Black female respectability. Nyla Ransom was born in 1961 to parents who migrated from the South to a city in New England. She says she "experimented with girls" when she was fourteen but did not define those experiences as gay or lesbian, only that she knew that she "might like the feelings that I was having from girls." In 1979, she met and fell in love with her best friend, Zora, while in college, but their relationship came to an end

because of their mutual belief that same-sex relationships were wrong. While Zora dated a few women after the breakup, Nyla became seriously involved with a male student in the business school. After about two and a half years of this life, Nyla changed course and made the decision to return to Zora because, she said, that's "where my heart was . . . I just knew with Zora that I enjoyed the sex, my heart was there. The guy was wonderful, I mean just really no problems and all of my friends were like, 'Wow!' And it was a great relationship, but I knew that Zora was who I wanted to be with." They have been together for eleven years.

Nyla's hesitation in deciding whether or not to be with Zora had to do with her interest in fulfilling the desires of her family and the expectations that came along with being a young Black woman educated at an elite institution: expectations that she move forward and "lead the race." She had overcome the obstacles that went along with being raised in a northeastern housing project, that she says was "just a little step above the ghetto," by an alcoholic mother and a father who was "in and out" of the household and living with "his other family." Despite these disadvantages, her parents had taken great pains to send her to private school through a special program for gifted minority students living in inner-city areas. Choosing a lesbian life might have upset the track Nyla was on and disrupted the image of respectability she had spent so many years perfecting. Nevertheless, she left a life of heterosexuality to be with Zora and says she has never looked back. She remains geographically distant from most of her family, only seeing them on holidays and special occasions. She says they are generally tolerant of her sexuality, and though at times she senses feelings of disapproval from them, her relationship with them is satisfactory.

The desire to present a respectable portrait of self and of Black womanhood was critically important for upwardly mobile conformists deciding whether to enact a gay sexuality. These women wanted to be seen as "good girls" and to live up to the expectations of previous generations of African Americans who had high hopes for their success. Some felt pressure to continue on the path of upward mobility that their middle-class parents had laid out for them, to use the educational opportunities that existed in their generation to do better than their parents had done, or to come to the United States to seek a better set of economic circumstances than those offered in their country of origin. Within all of these demands lies the expectation to conform to particular notions of respectability within Black American and Afro-Caribbean communities. Early efforts to conform, however, were eventually outweighed by their

greater desire to actively express a sexual agency by participating in gay intimate relationships.

#### HETERO-IDENTIFIED LESBIANS

Santasha Andrews, a magazine editor born in 1975, was explaining to me how she met her very first girlfriend, Denise. She said it started out as a friendship and then evolved into something else. I asked Santasha at what point did she acknowledge to herself that she was attracted to Denise. She said they met at a home-buying seminar. She was a graphic artist and Denise was looking for someone to design party invitations for an event she was going to host. They agreed to get together to discuss business over dinner:

During dinner, she asked me the question “Do you like men?” She didn’t tell me what her sexuality was off the bat, so I was thinking, “Why are you asking me what do I like?” And from that point on I knew she was a lesbian. Then it was little things. She was like “Do you like flowers?” And I was thinking “This chick is not going to buy me flowers,” so I’m like “No.” And then she walks me to the subway station, she pays my fare, she waits for the train to come. She lives in the Bronx and we were on Bergen near the F train [in Brooklyn] so I knew it was going to take her two hours to get home. And then she calls me when I get home to make sure I get home safe. And it’s just like it clicked. I think the following Saturday, she invited me to the movies and I liked her style, I liked things about her. So I started questioning myself, wondering “Am I attracted to this girl?” But that day when she invited me to the movies, I was by myself in my closet trying to find the perfect outfit to wear and I never, ever do that, not even if it was a man! (laughs) I literally had clothes *everywhere* trying them on. So that day I knew that I was attracted to her in another sense.

The eight hetero-identified lesbians I interviewed are women who report never having had any same-sex attractions in childhood or adolescence. Like Santasha, they first initiated a gay sexuality in adulthood after being attracted to or having a romantic encounter with an openly gay woman. After that relationship, they remained attracted to women and continued to pursue a gay sexuality. Unlike straight-up gay women, all of the hetero-identified lesbians once had concrete, if not completely conscious, identities as heterosexual, and they had their first experiences with same-sex desire when they were well into adulthood after serious relationships with men. Hetero-identified lesbians expressed these past heterosexual relationships as more meaningful to them than did conformists, and they all say they were in love with their male partners.

At some point in their adult lives, however, they formed a friendship with a gay woman that developed into an intimate relationship, or they sought out a lesbian social environment where they saw a woman they were attracted to and decided to further explore these newfound romantic feelings. After those experiences, they began to live out a gay identity.

For hetero-identified lesbians, gay sexuality is based primarily on current feelings of attachment and desire. They use a language of individual agency to speak about their sexuality, a language of “discovering” a possibility of female attraction and making a decision to pursue or to be receptive to it. Once they have made this decision, hetero-identified lesbians solidify their commitment to this way of life by becoming active participants in gay communities. Although they currently identify as gay and engage in same-sex romantic relationships, they may or may not see their gay sexuality as a firm component of their identities, or as an *identity status*. In other words, of all four ways of coming into the life identified in this chapter, hetero-identified lesbians are the least likely to view their sexuality through an essentialist lens, as an identity that is real and firm in their minds but that was not arrived at through an innate feeling of difference. However, they rely on the combined statuses of race and gender to create an essentialist construction of self, believing they are lesbians *right now* but will always be Black and female. Eight of the women who were interviewed fit into this group: six of them have a feminine gender presentation and the other two are gender-blenders.

Although hetero-identified lesbians comprise only 14 percent of the interview sample, they are an analytically important group because of the many ways they do not fit into the stereotypical image of lesbians held by some outsiders. They are almost always the objects of desire of less feminine women and men, and they can easily “pass” as heterosexual, giving them a particular advantage in society. Because of the way they come into a gay sexuality, other lesbians worry about this group’s commitment to the gay community. Hetero-identified lesbians do not identify as bisexual. When they first pursue same-sex desire, they may be reluctant to take on any identity related to sexuality, saying they “just happened” to fall in love with a woman but do not see themselves as lesbian. They do eventually come to identify as gay/lesbian and not bisexual, however. Indeed, they are particularly sensitive to the label “bisexual” and want to distinguish themselves from this group.

### *Gay Sexuality: A Newfound Desire*

The hetero-identified women I interviewed tended to report being exclusively or predominantly lesbian on their surveys, but they uniformly said they were exclusively heterosexual at ages fifteen and twenty-one. The age at which hetero-identified lesbians decided they were “definitely lesbian” was older than what was reported by the straight-up gay and conformist groups, ranging from twenty-eight to forty-one years old. For hetero-identified lesbians, contact with the lesbian community was critical to opening their interest in having a gay sexuality. About half actively sought out this contact, while the others fell into it by forming a friendship with an openly gay woman that later developed into a romantic relationship. Lisagor finds that public lesbian meeting places and bars in particular have historically served a particular socializing function by helping gay people to define themselves as gay (1980, 158). Gay bars also help individuals identify who is gay, and this is particularly important for individuals seeking out members of what can be an invisible, hard-to-reach group.

Unlike the women I call straight-up gay, hetero-identified lesbians are able to pinpoint the particular moment they first felt same-sex attraction. Rather than talking about having same-sex desires that they could not or would not express at an early age, hetero-identified lesbians often mention a specific woman they found themselves attracted to and making the decision to see where that attraction would lead. Berit Fontaine (b. 1967), for example, describes her foray into a lesbian life in the following way: “I was working at an organization, and there were a lot of gay and lesbian people in this particular organization. . . . And at that time I guess I was curious. I wanted to know what it would be like to be with a woman. But not even sexually, just as a friend, as a companion to hang out with and just to find out about the lifestyle. I just wanted to know about it. . . . One particular woman I was really, really interested in. I was really turned on by her, and we did get together. And, I mean, it was good for me.” Berit says she was surprised to find herself desiring women and would “tingle all over” when she would see a nonfeminine woman. Eventually, she had a liaison with someone and shortly thereafter began to more fully explore her feelings of same-sex attraction.

Whereas the straight-up gay respondents tended to understand their lesbian sexualities as strong and permanent, hetero-identified women’s lesbian sexualities were contingent on their having met a particular person

with whom they wanted to partner. Had they not had such an encounter, they are not certain when and whether they would ever have experienced a same-sex relationship. All of the hetero-identified women were in casual or committed relationships with other women at the time of interview, and their connection to the label lesbian or gay was largely based on that relationship combined with the one immediately preceding it.

### *Constructionist Understandings of Sexuality*

In defining her own sexuality, Adrienne Taylor, born in 1970, said the following: “As you know, sexuality is fluid, or in some people it’s temporal, it depends on not the moment but the time in your life, because I dated men for most of my life. But, I am in this relationship with Nilda, and I feel like I have . . . come into myself or this is who I am, and I know I feel very strongly about that. . . . I claim a lesbian identity because I think that best describes me and my life right now and the way that I look at the world and the way that I experience the world, but it doesn’t define my entire life, if that makes any sense. So it’s interesting. Unlike my Black identity—I don’t feel like it’s [my Black identity is] fluid. I don’t relate to it in that way, it’s very fixed.”

The trajectories of hetero-identified lesbians violate what Diamond and Savin-Williams (2000) refer to as the “master narrative” of traditional coming out models in important ways. These women do not think of themselves as being different from heterosexual women, nor do they express this difference physically: as noted, six of the eight women in this group have a feminine gender presentation, and the other two have what I define in the next chapter as a gender-blender presentation of self. They have no recollections of same-sex attraction in their pre-adult years, but once they had the experience of forming a romantic relationship or participating in a same-sex liaison, they decided to pursue it and began to insert themselves into existing lesbian communities. This pattern suggests, as other studies of lesbian sexuality have found, that homosexual identity formation is not always linear or predictable.<sup>14</sup>

As with some of the conformists, society’s punitive response to gay sexuality made several of the women repress the possibility until they were able to move away from their families of origin. It was then that they felt safe to explore any dormant or other unexpressed romantic feelings for women. For Adrienne, director of a nonprofit organization, coming into the life was a very long process involving an awareness of lesbian desire that she did not feel she could pursue until she moved



away from family and friends in the Northeast to Northern California. Prior to attending graduate school out West, Adrienne had not known or spent time around many lesbians. The Black gay people she knew in college back home had experienced harassment from other African Americans on her Ivy League campus: “I didn’t know that many lesbians, and I didn’t know what it was like. . . . I just didn’t know the range of lesbians and what they did. I didn’t have ideas, I didn’t have thoughts, I didn’t have images. But there were so many straight women that I could emulate or relate to on some levels, which is kind of like a default. So, I guess coming into the life was about reflecting on that and going away to school and just meeting different people and reading a lot. And just learning about different experiences.”

The key to the ongoing lesbian identity of hetero-identified women is their continued participation in the gay community through intimate relationships with women or through regular engagement with other gay people. Unlike the majority of straight-up gay women, hetero-identified women do not see their gay identity as an organic part of who they are, nor do they link it to gender presentation or notions of masculinity and femininity. They tend to avoid essentialist language about lesbian identity.

#### SEXUALLY FLUID WOMEN

When I asked Sonjee Montag, born in 1971, how she would define her sexuality, she replied: “How would I define it? [long pause] Um, to give you an honest, honest answer to that, I consider myself a woman. I don’t label myself. I do love women, but I have nothing against men. I would still consider myself bisexual only because I still have feelings for men, but I do not sleep with men. If I wasn’t in a relationship with a woman and depending on the situation, who I met, I can’t say that I wouldn’t date men.” Sonjee’s refusal to label herself is typical of women in the group I call “sexually fluid,” borrowing the term from a line of previous work on this topic, including a 2008 book with a similar title. As others have found at different points in time and with different cohorts of women, the majority of women who are gay report having had previous relationships and attractions to men as well as women.<sup>15</sup> My interviews suggest, however, that some portion of gay women have more fluid sexual desires than others, and women who eschew labels like lesbian, gay, women loving woman, same-gender-loving, or other such descriptors experience their sexuality as continuously fluid. This, in turn, affects how they are perceived by others in lesbian communities. They

may be labeled “opportunists” because they are perceived as being willing to have sexual liaisons with whomever is attracted to or notices them at a given moment. These women say they are unsure whether they will remain in relationships with women; they often report that they are struggling with their sexuality.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike straight-up gay women or conformists, whose lesbian sexuality has become a significant component of their self-definition, sexually fluid women tend to say that sexuality is something one does or enacts and should not be considered a defining component of their identity. Instead, they build a primary sense of self around other categories, like gender and race. For sexually fluid women, whether they are gay or straight depends on who they are loving or are attracted to at a particular moment. Like hetero-identified lesbians, they understand “gay” as an identity category dictated by setting and circumstance, not by a sense of fundamental difference. Twenty percent of the interview sample (twelve women) fit into this group, and they tend to have a feminine gender presentation.

While straight-up gay, conformist, and hetero-identified lesbians all reported themselves to be exclusively or predominantly lesbian, sexually fluid women were the most likely to say they used no sexuality label to define themselves. In response to the question at what age they first decided they were definitely lesbian, eight of the twelve sexually fluid women selected “I do not consider myself exclusively or predominantly lesbian.” These respondents either had no label for their sexuality or described their sexuality using terms like “open,” “fluid,” and “woman.” Take, for example, Naja Rhodes, who was born in 1976. She has a degree in social work and is the executive director of a nonprofit organization. She says people have different definitions of bisexuality, so she just tells them that she loves whomever she is dating at the time. In high school, she realized she could care for women in the way women (and she) also cared for men, and it was then that she learned to explore the part of herself that felt desire for women. Unlike those in the conformist group, Naja did not have feelings of desire that she could not name, but rather saw herself as having a *new understanding* that she could be attracted to a woman. She did not always desire women: instead, it was a matter of discovering the possibility of having same-sex desire and following up on that interest. When she dated men, she was attracted to “feminine” men or men who “balance both the masculine and the feminine.”

Alexandra DuBois, a social worker and therapist born in 1963, describes her sexuality in a similar way. In her interview, she identified herself as “bisexual with a 70-30 split leaning more towards women.”

She has dated men and women, though not both at the same time; she enjoys sex more with women than with men; and she is more sexually attracted to women. Beverly Howard, a physician born in 1968, says she identifies as bisexual “for right now” because she is attracted to men and to women. At the time of interview, she was in the process of getting a divorce after a seven-year heterosexual marriage and was simultaneously experiencing her first committed relationship with a woman. Prior to meeting her partner, Adina Montenay, Beverly said she always knew women she admired and wanted to be friends with, but she had never felt anything romantic or sexual for women.

What began as a sexual liaison quickly morphed into deeper feelings of desire and wanting to share a life with Adina. Beverly was pleasantly surprised to realize that she feels a greater emotional connection in this relationship, and she attributed this to Adina’s being female. She said she had never experienced with men the closeness and connection she has with women, telling me, “I don’t know if there’s a man out there who can have the same sensuality and a more emotional connection [with me] than I have had with this woman. . . . The relationship I’m in with this woman has afforded me way more feelings of freedom and sharing and comfort in our relationship that I just didn’t have with him [her husband].” Initially, Beverly’s husband did not find her interest in women threatening to their relationship, and he encouraged her to explore herself sexually. He thought Beverly’s interest in women was purely sexual, but as she shared all of the feelings she was having for Adina with him, he began to worry.

Beverly’s experience with her husband is similar to what other sexually fluid women in the study reported. At first, their male partners were intrigued by their mate’s interest in women and allowed them to explore sexually, sometimes wanting to be part of that sexual exploration. The men began to feel threatened when their partners’ interests took a more serious turn and when those interests began to manifest themselves as a desire to be only with women or to be only with one particular woman. One difference between sexually fluid women and the women who have been on other pathways to a lesbian identity, however, is that they are still open to dating men in the future. Beverly says that if she and Adina ended their relationship, she would date men again because she finds them attractive.

In comparing lesbian and bisexual women, Rust (1992) finds that both similarly report prior sexual experiences with men. However, lesbians locate these relationships firmly in the past, and current *behavior*

is more important in determining sexual identity. Bisexuals report continuous and present-day attractions to men and place a greater emphasis on the *sexual feelings* they currently have when naming their sexual identity. Diamond (2008) builds on Rust's work to argue that for women with nonexclusive attractions to women and men, fixed identities do not represent the complicated, situation-specific nature of their sexuality. Bisexual or sexually fluid women also experienced gaps between the relative sexual and emotional attractions they had toward women, with some having strong physical but weak emotional attractions to women, and vice versa. These inconsistencies and gaps caused them to avoid labeling a particular identity around their sexual desires.

Five of the twelve women in the sexually fluid category (and more in this category than any other) told me that they were sexually molested or sexually abused in childhood and early adolescence by other adults, both male and female.<sup>17</sup> Shaniqua Banner, born in 1978, became pregnant at the age of thirteen by an adult who her mother allowed to move in with them as Shaniqua's boyfriend. The adult was physically and emotionally abusive to Shaniqua, who could not be protected by her mother, who was battling a drug addiction. While Shaniqua does not specifically label her relationship with the father of her child as sexual abuse, their age difference suggests an inappropriate and illegal relationship between adult and child. Now, at age twenty-five, despite being in a six-year cohabiting relationship with her partner, she does not want to choose a label to define her sexuality. She explained: "I don't consider myself gay, I don't consider myself straight. It is whoever catches my eye and if they are good to me, that is who I am going to be with, it doesn't matter what sex you are. So if you want to call that 'bisexual,' fine, but I choose not to even label it." She said she is still trying to define herself and has not figured it out yet.

There seems to be more than one path toward a gay sexuality for sexually fluid women. Some refuse to label their sexuality because they have no language to describe their experiences with women and men in way that would be consistent with the expectations of the larger lesbian community. Others are hesitant to apply a label because they do not have one preference and base their decisions about whom to sleep with on factors other than sexual identity. Karen Jabar, born in 1961, for example, suffered through a traumatic childhood. She moved to a group home away from her ten siblings at the age of thirteen after her mother went to prison for killing her father in self-defense during a fight that

began when they were both drinking heavily. (Both of her parents were alcoholics.) She eventually married a man and stayed with him for twenty-one years before they separated and she began dating women. Karen says her first same-sex sexual experience was to “accommodate” a young woman who was in love with her when she lived in the group home as a teenager. Even though she did not come into a gay sexuality until twenty-five years later after a long-term heterosexual marriage, she links her lesbian desires to the early experience she had in adolescence. When I spoke to her, she was forty-two years old, and she identified herself as “predominantly lesbian” because her relationships in the previous five years were with women and as “slightly heterosexual” because she is still attracted to men and open to dating them in the future if she is not able to “settle down in an immediate relationship [serious committed relationship with a woman] by [age] forty-five.” She said that men are still a romantic possibility for her: “I’m attracted to both sexes, and they are to me.” She is also open to being with men because she says she is looking for someone who is financially secure, and she believes men are more economically stable than the women she has been meeting and dating. Notice that Karen does not base her decision regarding whether to date women or men on her identity as either heterosexual or gay, nor does she base it on particular feelings or desires for one sex or the other. It seems that Karen’s sexuality responds, rather, to her perceptions of what women compared to men can provide—the perceived economic costs and benefits of heterosexual versus lesbian relationships. Her opinions reflect societal norms about men as providers of economic security.

For some sexually fluid women, Beverly Howard among them, time reveals that a stated attraction to both women and men is a stage in the transition from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity. When I met with Dr. Howard again three years after our first interview, she was still in a committed cohabiting relationship with Adina, and she claimed a lesbian rather than a bisexual identity. For others, however, past and current experiences with men as well as with women indicate an enduring fluidity in sexual orientation.

In Black lesbian communities in New York there is an unwritten taboo against self-labeling as bisexual. Women who participate in lesbian communities, who seek out female partners, and who want to be considered part of lesbian social groups are expected to choose whether they are lesbian or straight and to stick to those categories, much as many biracial and multiracial individuals experience pressure from African

Americans within their social groups to choose a racial category as their dominant identity status. Those who are thought of as “straight with bisexual tendencies” are talked about in a negative way.

Women who have committed themselves to the gay community use words like “greedy” or “selfish” to describe bisexual or sexually fluid women. This group is perceived by some to be untrustworthy in their commitment to lesbian relationships because they are thought to enjoy fulfilling sexual encounters with women while leaving the hard work and stigma of being openly and consistently gay, to others. As Elizabeth put it, “Bisexuals want to benefit from our struggle without actually going through the struggle. They can just ‘dip out’ and leave ‘the life’ when things get tough.” Self-identified gay women who engage in relationships with self-identified bisexuals (also sometimes referred to in the communities I studied as “bi-curious”) feel particularly vulnerable to having their relationships end with the bisexual partner returning to a hidden boyfriend or other male sexual partner. In my study, the partnered, cohabiting women who identified as “free,” bisexual, or other statuses consistent with sexual fluidity remained in lesbian relationships throughout the time of the study. The unpartnered sexually fluid women dated men within the three years of my fieldwork. This suggests that the sexually fluid women in this work who defined themselves as creating a family with a cohabiting female partner retained some type of similarity with self-identified gay women, despite assigning themselves a label other than lesbian or gay. The unpartnered sexually fluid women (also single mothers), may have had a weaker commitment to a specifically lesbian way of life.

## COMMONALITIES ACROSS PATHWAYS

One commonality across all four of the categories I have identified concerns the ways respondents describe their feelings for women, the reasons why they want to be in relationships with women, and how they see relationships with women as different from those with men. Desire, physical pleasure, and intimacy are the primary explanations they give for why they prefer women as romantic partners. Evangelina Tarcel, a paralegal born in 1966 and part of the conformist group, says she enjoyed dating men in the past and was once in love with the father of her child. She explains, however, that “with women it is something totally different. . . . I mean the passion is stronger, the connection for me is stronger. We relate more, we share a lot of the same experiences, a lot of the same feelings. We

communicate more. Men tend not to want to communicate or they don't know how, and for me, physically it is the passion [between women] that is much more intense." Nilda Flores, a straight-up gay woman, says she prefers lesbian relationships because she feels a commonality with women in general. She says she really enjoys women, feels part of a community and a solidarity with them. Santasha Andrews, a hetero-identified woman, maintains that there is a greater expectation of closeness in relationships with women than in those with men. She says: "I think a relationship with a man and a relationship with a woman are totally two different things . . . with a woman, I think the emotion is more sensual, it's cultured, it's just different. You build the relationship differently. Like say you were dating this guy and he didn't call one night. You kind of expect that, as opposed to if you were seeing this woman, [you would say], 'Why you ain't called me!' (laughs) It's really different. That's one thing with lesbian women that really gets me is how emotional it is."

Women across all four groups also had a similar need to physically distance themselves from their families of origin before they were able to openly share their gay identities with parents and parental figures. While straight-up gay women and conformists experienced and often acted on same-sex attraction while living at home, they needed to separate themselves from parents, siblings, and others to fully express a gay sexuality before they could acknowledge it to others. Having left close family and heterosexual friends temporarily behind, they sought out racially similar lesbian and gay social environments and came into their sexuality through socialization with older, racially similar gay people. Even when these women attended predominantly White or racially integrated colleges, they still relied on settings that were culturally comfortable when learning how they would express their same-sex desire.

Sociologist Arlene Stein found that of the lesbians who came into their sexuality through lesbian feminism, some had same-sex desire, while others were "catapulted by sexual experimentation and rebellion" (1997, 154). For this group, lesbianism was a way to bond with women and gain strength and confidence. They were socialized into lesbian worlds that contained women's consciousness-raising groups, lesbian-feminist groups, and groups that identified and tried to cultivate a particular "lesbian consciousness" (55). Stein argued that the old gay world conceptualized lesbianism as desire, while the new gay world sees it as woman identification (see also Esterberg 1997). I have found, however, that the existing literature on lesbian and gay identities has not adequately

looked beyond the lesbian-feminist experience when trying to create a framework for understanding and interpreting various understandings of lesbian sexuality that lesbians have created for themselves. The Black women I spoke to still link their lesbian sexuality with desire. Indeed, in all four categories, the women I interviewed tended not to ascribe their motivations for entering their relationships in lesbian-feminist or political language. Even those who came of age during the 1970s women's movement did not specifically mention feminism or make the types of feminist arguments that subjects in other recent work have presented as factors directly influencing whether and how women enact a gay sexuality.

When directly asked whether their interest in women was in any way connected to their understanding of feminism, the overwhelming majority said no. A few, like conformist Luz Rivera (b. 1972) and straight-up gay woman Corey James (introduced earlier), said yes, but neither of these women linked their development of a gay sexuality to feminism. Similarly, the women I interviewed did not expressly conceive of lesbianism as a way to dismantle the patriarchy that exists in relationships between men and women. For these women, gay identity is more about feelings of desire for women. To be sure, the threat and experience of female subordination imposed by men exists in their life histories. Many have suffered from spousal abuse, poverty, drug use, sexual abuse, controlling relationships, disruptions in household finances, and expectations of heteronormative behavior. All of these directly or indirectly involve patriarchal and oppressive relationships with men as husbands, boyfriends, or fathers. In their stories of how they came to be interested in pursuing a gay sexuality, however, these women conveyed that the relationships they had with men were not the strongest barriers to their coming to identify with a lesbian sexuality. In other words, men did not push them into enacting a lesbian sexuality. Instead, it was the quality of the relationships they had or were able to achieve with women that pulled them in that direction.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter provides support for the theoretical foundations of Black queer studies, which argue that racial identity importantly contributes to the creation (some would say invention) of a total homosexual body (Johnson and Henderson 2005). An analysis of the structural positions



of race and class in the process of coming into a gay sexuality adds an important dimension to what is already known about this process.

First, we see that the standard model for how an individual comes to understand her lesbian sexual orientation is incomplete. The six stages (subjective sense of being different, identifying those feelings as homosexual, telling others, accepting those feelings as part of an identity, seeking a community of like persons, and entering a lesbian relationship) at best only account for one particular pathway into a gay sexuality: that of straight-up gays, or women whom previous scholars have labeled “primary” lesbians. These are women who base their gay sexuality in feelings of difference—in an essentialist understanding of sexuality—who experience sexual orientation as a concrete identity status, and who arrive at this status at an early enough age that they have little or no romantic intimacy with men. But even when this process adequately captures the experiences of Black lesbians, it remains incomplete because it neglects the formation of other important identity statuses that are occurring simultaneously, such as those based in race and gender. The salience of race and gender cannot be ignored as it relates to the formation of an understanding of one’s sexuality.

Also importantly, the sexual identities formed by the women I interviewed have a distinctive character relative to those of their heterosexual peers and their non-Black lesbian peers. Black lesbians enter into a gay sexuality with previously formed identity statuses based in race, gender, and class that are shaped by structural forces, cultural and historical experiences, and individual daily life experiences. I did not find differences by class background in my four routes into a gay identity: middle-class women, for example, were no more or less likely to have a straight-up gay, conformist, hetero-identified, or fluid sexuality. Social class did figure importantly into how women came to understand and express a gay sexuality, however. Economic conditions make the primary focus of poor people one of physical survival, so the freedom to develop and implement a gay sexual orientation becomes a luxury that is not always available, as the life story of conformist Elizabeth Bennett illustrates. For upwardly mobile women negotiating multiple stigmas of race and gender in the labor market, the decision to adopt an open, public gay identity poses specific risks to economic stability that may be too great to bear, and this may have the effect of delaying the age at which they accept an openly gay identity or the ways in which they live out a lesbian sexuality.

The work of psychologist Beverly Greene (1997, 2002) shows the ways in which the lives of women of color are influenced by their cultural histories and communities, as well as by the attitudes of the dominant society. Black women face particular challenges in integrating more than one identity, particularly when those identities are stigmatized. An analysis of coming out processes for Black lesbians reveals that Black bodies become racialized before they are “homosexualized” (to use Marlon Ross’s 2005 terminology), and the multiple identity statuses they occupy become visible at different times. These things influence the formation of sexual identity and have implications for many aspects of individual and collective identity, as Chapter 3 will reveal.

In studying sexual identity processes in Black lesbians, the consequences of racial social and residential segregation become quite salient. The majority of the women in this work both “came out” by having a discussion about their sexual orientation with an important family member and “came into” a gay sexuality by learning about the social norms and expectations of Black lesbian communities. As Greene and others have shown, the dominant model omits the cultural element of sexual orientation in its description. Indeed, it omits both the cultural element of lesbian communities and the culture that individuals bring to self-understandings of multiple identities. The development of gay identities in specific racial contexts was taken for granted in previous studies of White men and women. The insular characteristics of racially segregated social spaces have historically kept separate lesbian-feminist political ideologies or other theoretical ideologies that determine what constitutes “appropriate” or “developed” sexual identity. The absence of these perspectives as active agents of socialization opened up a space for other interpretations to manifest themselves and persist over time.

Other research, like that of Hawkeswood (1996), Johnson (2008), and Peña (2004) on same-gender-loving men of color, has found that they do not always have this coming out conversation with family members in order to live fulfilled lives. All but two of the women I spoke with have told a parent or parental figure about their gay sexuality; this may be because I am specifically studying people who are forming families. People engaged in this project may have a particular understanding of their sexuality and a public enactment of it that encourages disclosure to close loved ones. As women, they may also receive greater acceptance as homosexuals relative to Black men.<sup>18</sup> There are other women with same-sex desire or who live in partnerships with other women who are not present in this work. They do not acknowledge having a same-sex at-

traction to anyone, and do not name themselves as gay, lesbian, in the life, same-gender-loving, women loving women, or any other identity status.

I find that the U.S. context and the particular environment of New York is the deciding factor for foreign-born women in their willingness and opportunity to enact a lesbian sexuality. So what is it about the United States, and New York specifically, that facilitates Caribbean women's entry into a sexuality that is specifically lesbian? First, there is a more public social life for gays and lesbians in the United States than in their countries of origin, and it provides a more open context for the exploration of an openly gay sexuality. Moreover, New York has historically provided social spaces that are racially and ethnically singular, allowing for an understanding of one's gay sexuality in a context that is culturally similar to one's own ethnic identity. Significant populations of Caribbeans and Africans and second-generation Afro-Caribbean groups in New York City participate in lesbian and gay male social events. These activities are satisfying because they allow individuals to engage their ethnic cultures in gay-identified spaces. Gay sexuality under these circumstances is not seen as White or Western, and these contexts allow gay Caribbeans to integrate multiple aspects of their identities.

How women's accounts of their lives resonate with social science theories of identity, group membership, sexual agency, and community has been the focus of this chapter. Social constructionist approaches say identities are multiple and contingent. They are created within the context of specific communities and within specific relationships. Identities are ways of sorting through experiences of desires and attractions, relationships and politics, and the meanings of identities change over time. Social constructionism distinguishes between homosexual *acts*, which can occur in many different contexts, and homosexual *actors*, whose identities and lifestyles are organized around their erotic desires for people of the same gender. The women in my study are interesting, because while the majority (81 percent) of the 100 survey respondents agree that being gay is beyond one's control, they are sharply divided on whether being gay is a conscious choice they have personally made. Half agree that it is a choice they have made, supporting a constructionist view of sexual orientation, while half disagree, suggesting an essentialist interpretation of sexual orientation. Indeed, the majority (79 percent) agree that one can be gay and never act on those feelings. This suggests a set of decision-making processes around three areas: having the feeling of same-sex desire, which the majority sees as something out of their

control; participating in a homosexual act, which the majority see as within their control because they can decide whether to act on their feelings; and becoming a homosexual actor, or taking on an identity and living an “out” life as a gay person.

We can see the fluidity in how gay sexuality is perceived and enacted even among those who say they have always had same-sex desire or who have had no serious relationships with men. They view this desire in an essentialized way, but they still describe a process of *accomplishing* a gay identity, of arriving at a fixed identity. Each group’s discussion of gay sexuality shows the constructed and at times flexible nature of identity that is based in sexuality. Straight-up gay women, who have never had serious romantic relationships with men, tend to have a gender presentation that is nonfeminine. Conformists, or women who dated men early on despite early feelings of same-sex desire and subsequently took on a gay identity, tend to have a gender presentation that is either feminine or a blend of feminine and nonfeminine. Hetero-identified women, who dated men exclusively and never desired women until adulthood, mostly take on a feminine gender display. Sexually fluid women also have a feminine gender presentation. These relationships between pathways to a gay identity and gender presentation in lesbian communities are further explored and developed in the following chapter on gender presentation.